

## BLIZZARD OF '49, WYOMING PUBLIC TELEVISION ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Kyle: Loretta, just state for the camera your name.

Loretta: My name is Loretta Jewel.

Kyle: And you grew up in this area around Carpenter, Wyoming, right?

Loretta: Yes, on a farm 4 miles from the little town of Carpenter.

Kyle: Ignore the camera, look at me, if you can see me. So, January, New Year's Day was ...

Loretta: New Year's Day was unusually balmy and mild. People were out visiting their relatives and celebrating the holiday. The first reports in this area were received from Casper that there was a storm coming. On Sunday, the next morning ... See, this wasn't New Year's Day blizzard. It was January 2nd. Everybody says New Years but New Year's Day was fine, Saturday. I think it's Sunday, I can't do this without notes.

Kyle: No, it's okay. It was Sunday, yes.

Loretta: New Year's Day was on Saturday, 1949, and it was a beautiful balmy day and the people went out to visit their relatives and all and the weekend, a lot of them staying overnight with families. Sunday, the storm came from Casper and [00:02:00] arrived so suddenly that people were caught on the roads and out taking care of their livestock and everything. It struck in the southeastern corner of Laramy County about 2PM in the afternoon.

Kyle: You were on your family ranch when that blizzard hit?

Loretta: We had a diversified farm 4 miles from Carpenter and we had all kinds of livestock but we had small enough and buildings enough that our livestock was pretty much protected and taken care of.

Kyle: So, that day, that Saturday, it was really blowing hard, right?

Loretta: Sunday.

Kyle: I mean Sunday.

Loretta: Sunday, when the blizzard came in, it was so sharp and cold, it would take your breath away.

Kyle: It didn't stop that Sunday, did it?

Loretta: Usually when a storm came through, it might be 24 hours and it would usually clear about 4PM the next afternoon or so. It did not clear for any time at all from Sunday afternoon at 2:00 or 3:00 until Wednesday morning.

Kyle: So Wednesday morning, it started to clear up but it was still desperately cold and windy?

Loretta: The sun was shining but it was bitter cold.

Kyle: How did the landscape around your farm change?

Loretta: Our farm was a totally level as a table top and it was the first time we had hills to sled on. They were [00:04:00] snow banks close to 15-16 feet deep up the sides and clear over the roof of the barn and crushed some of the timbers of the barn roof. We played on that snowbank for the next 6 weeks with our sleds.

Kyle: Amazing. I'm sure you knew and/or heard of many people from the immediate area that suffered some pretty devastating livestock losses.

Loretta: My uncle lost a few of his calves. They were in a pasture where there were trees, a stream and gulleys and they would gather together in these low spots and actually be buried in snow. There was loose livestock roaming the country because they could walk right out over the corral fences. One neighbor, the milk cow was in a small shed but when he went to get it opened and all, she was so panicked from being shut in and all, she practically ran over him and that cow went 2 miles from home before they found her again.

Kyle: Were there significant losses of livestock? [00:06:00]

Loretta: Yes. The sheep losses were really bad and yet amazing stories of their survival. One family couldn't find their herd of sheep at all, thought they had wandered clear away. Then they heard a little commotion and they had eaten their way, burrowed into the haystacks and were actually there but they were in the haystacks.

Kyle: I've heard stories of people using coals to find sheep under snowbanks.

Loretta: And the pigs. The hogs were the most amazing. They could survive the longest buried of anything. One farmer thought his were all gone and he spent all of his time rescuing everything else because the hog houses were covered. But he heard them and went out there and shoveled them out and the hogs survived.

Kyle: What about the wildlife in the area, how did the storm affect the wildlife?

Loretta: Before the blizzard, we had a pretty good population of pheasants and there wasn't hardly a pheasant left. They couldn't survive it. They were buried too long.

Kyle: Did you see when the snow finally let up, there were ...

Loretta: Well, the tidals pretty much took care of the bodies and so on. Yes, we would see dead livestock and deer and so on around. Actually the country didn't smell very well that spring, there was so many dead animals around.

Kyle: Speaking of spring, was it an especially muddy spring after all the snow?

Loretta: Yes. When it melted, it was horrific. Then we had to fight the muddy roads. It wasn't just one storm, it just kept coming. Week after week, it would either blow or snow some more or melt and refreeze. One lady said [00:08:00] it was just a trying time. It just went on and on.

Kyle: There were some fatalities in the area and one of them was this family called Archiletta?

Loretta: Yes. I can't remember his first name.

Kyle: Let's talk about Andy Archiletta.

Loretta: There were human tragedies in the storm and one of the most heartbreaking was a family who lived in Hillsdale, Wyoming. He worked for the Union Pacific Railroad and they were visiting friends in the town of Pine Bluffs about 30 miles away and the friends insisted they should stay when the storm blew in but he was so concerned about being on the job on his next shift that they started home. They traveled up, at that time Highway 30 to a junction called Antelope Junction later but it was Joe's Place at that time. It was already crammed with people, 30 or 40 people in this little small service station. Andy bought a gallon of gas because they only had about 7 miles to go. They went off into the storm and they got the 2 miles north to Berns. But going west into the teeth of the storm, [00:10:00] they went into a low valley and the snow was too deep and they became stuck. Andy tried everything he could think of to keep his little family alive. But the car filled with snow completely burying them in the snow and they died there.

The rescuers, when it was realized they were not in Pine Bluffs and should've been back to Hillsdale, it was into Thursday, I think. The rescuers were using school buses and everything they could that had enough power and shoveling

and they couldn't even get down that road into that little valley. Several men walked approximately a mile and all they could see of that car was the radio antenna and they found. They started digging. When they opened the door, it was full of snow. They excavated the bodies out and they took the hood off of the automobile, found some barbed wire fence wire or maybe had rope, supplies with them but they made a sled out of the hood of the automobile. They placed the 3 bodies up on it and pulled it back to the school bus. The coroner reported that Mrs. Archiletta had died only a few hours before the rescuers came.

Kyle: Loretta, that was fantastic. Let's just back up and I want to insert one detail that you missed and that was him going out and cutting the fence post and burning it in the hubcap. We can just insert it. You can just talk about that a little bit. At one point, he went out of the ... you know, [00:12:00] something like that.

Loretta: At one point in the ordeal, Andy got out of the car and found a broken fence post. He ripped a hubcap off and put them in the backseat of the car and he had matches and he tried to start a fire to keep them warm but he didn't allow enough ventilation and the soot and the smoke only added to their troubles.

Kyle: Great. Do you know the Dorothy Baskins story by heart?

Loretta: No, I have to look it up a little bit. She was in the first book, wasn't she?

Kyle: Ninety-nine, I think.

Loretta: Oh Dorothy, she was a gal. She was some gal. Let's see now, they were up on the bridge. Of all the places, up on that darned viaduct.

Kyle: Okay, we're rolling.

Loretta: You're not asking questions?

Kyle: The Archiletta situation was one example of a stranded car on the highway but the Baskins story has a better ending to it.

Loretta: One lady that was very proud of her survival and how they handled the blizzard was named Dorothy Baskins and her husband Jake. They had her sister Lila and nephew ... We'll have to cut that.

Kyle: That's fine.

Loretta: Stories of survival were the norm [00:14:00] rather than the few tragedies but the people had to be very inventive and very strong willed to survive such a storm. Jake and Dorothy Baskins and her sister May had attended a wedding.

This just isn't coming out right. My sister May. My sister Lila. I don't know how to do these.

Kyle: Maybe we don't need such a long lead up. Maybe we can just say they got stranded on the side of the road coming back from a wedding.

Loretta: Yeah. I got to get my names right. The wedding was her sister there but I don't need that. But I can't find the kid's name. There was 4 of them in that little care. Wayne. Wayne. Oh, their son. Okay.

One family who survived the ordeal were Jake and Dorothy Baskins and their son Wayne and her sister May who had attended a wedding in Cheyenne. When they came out from the party, the blizzard was already raging but Jake insisted they would go home. Within a few miles out of Cheyenne, the snow was so thick that Jake had to roll down the window and stick his head out to even see the side of the road. [00:16:00] They traveled over a viaduct over the Union Pacific railroad east of Cheyenne and became stranded. Being on the high point, the car rocked and rolled with the storm and they sat there and entertained the boy. Wayne was 7 years old. And talked and everything they could think of to entertain themselves. They had one blanket and their coat, they stuffed in cracks or anything else they could find in the car because the snow was sifting in on them.

When nature called the first day, it was horrific to have to get out of the automobile and then everybody would be chilled and wet. They had to stomp their feet and clap their hands and everything they could think of to get warm again. At first they could run the heater at times and take off the chill but eventually, I think they ran out of gas. Eventually, the car wouldn't start any longer. Jake was suffering from lack of cigarettes because they smoked a lot the first night and then decided they should've been saving them. Jake did suffer frostbit to his feet. After a time, they could not feel their feet and their toes. Finally, there were buses and vehicles starting to come through and they were rescued and considered themselves mighty lucky.

Kyle: Good.

Loretta: Yeah, they ended up at the Hereford Ranch. I loved [00:18:00] doing this. These people were so much fun. When I did my homestead books, they were good and those people were proud to be written up. They said you make us immortal. But these people, it was just plain fun most of the time to review this. They thought it was wonderful.

Kyle: Did you want to comment at all about the trains stuck at Eggbert and Tillsdale?

Loretta: No, but I would talk about the Carpenter line.

Kyle: Let's talk about that.

Loretta: Carpenter was serviced by the CB&Q Railroad from Sterling to Cheyenne, once a day train with mail and freight and haul out livestock and all. It did not make its run for 6 weeks following the blizzard.

Kyle: Was this like a supply train then for the town of Carpenter for groceries, et cetera?

Loretta: Well, the mail was the main contract and shipping livestock out. There was a little stockyard here. For supplies to the lumber yard but not necessarily the groceries. They trucked in from Cheyenne. The railroad lost the mail contract because during the period, the mail was trucked in and found out that was going to work better. So the railroad lost the contract over the 6 week delay. A few passengers rode by train.

Kyle: What about food supplies though, you know? I know a lot of the farmers and ranchers were pretty self sufficient.

Loretta: Exactly.

Kyle: Maybe we can talk about that [00:20:00] a little bit. Don't play with the cord because we can hear it. Do something else with your hands.

Loretta: It's bugging me, hanging there.

Rural people do very well keeping themselves supplied with gasoline and groceries and supplies. So we didn't suffer from that except where families took in extra people and then that became a problem to feed everybody. For the most part, the self sufficiency of the families served them very well. The store of course, ran low on supplies but you substituted and made due.

Kyle: Speaking about families taking in stranded people during the blizzard, I know that there a bunch of stories about that but maybe you can just kind of generally talk about that kind of outreach that people did. It seemed like everybody pulled together during the blizzard and helped everybody else out. I'm wondering if you can just kind of generally talk about that.

Loretta: When somebody knocked at the door in the storm, there was no question that you would take them in and do everything you could to make them comfortable. The rural area, for the most part, we didn't have extras come in from the storm like they did off of the highways but the families that were having their reunions and all were the ones that were hard put to find food enough and beds and blankets and all [00:22:00] to take care of everybody.

Kyle: I've read some account where there were 30 and upwards of stranded people in some of these places and they were really stressing out there. You know, they're laden supplies from their root cellars and their canning and everything like that but you know, what else are you going to do I guess.

Loretta: We got out between the blizzards and used the tractors and went to town on the tractors and get a gunny sack full of supplies. It wasn't a major problem for this area because the towns were fairly close. The neighbors picked up the mail for each other and would get groceries for each other. Anybody that was going would stop and what do you need the most and they would bring it back. They had a good system going there.

Kyle: Speaking about food et cetera, wasn't there some aerial food drops to people in the area?

Loretta: That was the only air mail that Carpenter got. We did get the Pine Bluffs Post delivered by air. They made signs in the snow. They were given a code over the radio. If you needed food or if you needed something, you used the different codes and they would look for them with the little airplane pilots cruising around and try to drop them. It didn't work so well with eggs. It didn't work with the little sacks of yeast, they ended up in the snowbanks sometimes. There was all kinds of problems with the aerial drops. The main aerial program was the hay drops to the cattle for the bigger ranches. That was fantastic. [00:24:00]

Kyle: I think that was the Air Force, maybe out of Lowry down in Denver or maybe out of Nebraska.

Loretta: Out of Nebraska, some of them. Especially the ones with the skunk in the airplane.

Kyle: What's that?

Loretta: It was in one of the newspapers, I think the Omaha World Herald, and I believe it was an Air Force plane. They loaded up this baled hay so quickly into this cargo plane and flew out over the prairie and they had awakened a poor little skunk from his hibernation and he was running around in the airplane with them but they pushed him out too. It was cute.

Kyle: I was kind of struck by you talking about that Baskins family thinking about they shouldn't have smoked all those cigarettes at once. I wonder if there were messages please send cigarettes and maybe please send whiskey.

Loretta: They did one fellow. There were 2 pilots in Pine Bluffs making runs off of Highway 30, right downtown Pine Bluffs and delivering groceries. They thought

their buddy needed a little jolt to keep him going out there. So they very well packed up a little bottle and delivered it so nicely. Well, it was 2 or 3 days before he came into town and he was pretty desperate. They said well didn't you get the airmail delivery. You know, no I didn't. They went and found it against the backside of the house but he hadn't found it.

Kyle: Now that's an airdrop.

Loretta: That was an airdrop. They tried.

Kyle: The accuracy was amazing, the back of the house. I've heard stories of some ranchers say now you've gotta get this hay bale as close to the house as you possibly can [00:26:00] because I don't want to go out that far for it and they take out part of the house or part of the barn.

Loretta: One fellow had the gall though to ask them, when they came to plow out his yard, to ask them to take certain hay stacks because he was saving the others for an emergency. Wonderful stories. The amazing thing that I have found over the the '49 blizzard was very few heart attacks. The people were used to shoveling manure, grain, hay, sand, whatever. We had strong hearts and we could take it. There were very few serious illnesses from that. There was some frostbite but most people knew how to treat their frostbite.

Kyle: That's really interesting. Speaking of which, I'm sure, and I don't know if there were any around in your area here, but I'm sure there must have been some medical emergencies like maybe appendicitis or babies who aren't waiting.

Loretta: The sudden drop of the barometer caused every women who was near giving birth to think she was having her baby. They did use the little weasel through the telephone company and they did take a lot of women in to the hospitals for their babies.

Kyle: So that really severe drop in barometric pressure?

Loretta: That was enough to trigger the labor pains.

Kyle: Wow. Wow.

Loretta: There were 2 women stranded out west of Carpenter at Arcola. Both of them close to having their babies and their husbands weren't at the family gathering and [00:28:00] when they got out there all panicky and everything and they did transport them by weasel. They got a hold of the Army and by weasel to the hospital. I think one baby was born right away and the other one waited another 3 weeks or so.



Kyle: Do you know of any stories about people getting kind of desperate because of this was just going. It wasn't the 3 day storm necessarily but storm after storm after storm and I don't know if people did run out of food or run out of fuel?

Loretta: Mostly we had propane or wood burning stoves. The lack of telephone lines was the major problem, the lack of communication. The electricity was new. They had just formed the rural electric association. The poles were strong and the electricity did not fail through that entire storm except one place up by Hillsdale where a bull worked his way out of a cow shed and broke off a poll.

Kyle: That's really remarkable that it didn't fail.

Loretta: It was all new poles and new lines. For those of us who had the power, that was wonderful but we still had wood burning stoves and so on too, to take care of it. Propane trucks were out all over all of the time. They were desperate to resupply people's propane tanks.

Kyle: Speaking of fuel et cetera, can we go back to your story [00:30:00] and during the blizzard? What was your house heated with and what were the conditions in your house? Did you have to close off rooms, et cetera?

Loretta: Our house was only 3 room above and the basement. We had a heater in the basement and we had to be careful how much wood we used. My parents went out only once hoping to get fresh eggs so Mom could bake and they got separated on two sides of a snowbank. My mom screamed and hollered until Dad found his way back around and they joined hands and went to the house and they never went out again in it. It frightened them. We had to dig the snow out then afterwards. We had to take the glass out of the storm door to get out on the door step to shovel the door open to get out of the house. Shoveled and shoveled.

Kyle: I've also heard stories, I'm sure you remember these too, the snow infiltrating into people's attic spaces.

Loretta: We had some seepage and some leaks in the bedroom ceiling when it was over. The whole ceiling collapsed in one house just a mile from Carpenter. The whole ceiling came down in that house. It didn't matter whether it was plaster or fiber board or what. If the snow got in there, it was heavy and wet and it did a lot of damage. Of course, they claimed there was a whole snowbank in the café in Alvin that came in just through the keyhole.

Kyle: You said you didn't see much military here but I guess [00:32:00] President Truman authorized General Pick to come out and shovel out the west basically, with bulldozers.

Loretta: This area was kind of on the edge of it, not as bad as it was in Nebraska. Being so level and all, we didn't have the really deep drifts in the ravines. It didn't take us too long to shovel out just with the regular snow plows and tractors. Packed the roads with the tractors and take care of ourselves here. I can't remember weasels and government stuff in this area as much. But there were very few four wheel drive trucks or vehicles at that time.

Kyle: It was basically county snow plows?

Loretta: Yes, our local snow plows worked day and night.

Kyle: I guess we're going to let Erin Berger handle the train stuff of which she's quite capable. What about clothing and people that had to go out? They didn't have insulated clothing like we have today.

Loretta: Well, we knew how to dress for the weather. The rubber over boots and wool clothing mainly. Some people had Army surplus pants and the arctic gear and so on, caps with ear flaps. Gloves were the main problem. They were constantly wet. Dry them out of the furnace and put them on and go back out. It was uncomfortable but we were working so hard, we were keeping [00:34:00] warm.

Kyle: I'm going through my notes here. Why don't you cut for a minute Pat?

Loretta: The first few days after the blizzard, there was no question that we would be having school. But after a week or so, you never knew if the bus was going to come or not. So you had to get up and get ready every morning and wait and wait. After an hour after the bus should've come, you gave up and put back your everyday clothes and went to play in the snow. We were constantly late to classes because then the buses would get stuck on the roads. The farmers were always ready to get the tractor out and pull the school bus out a certain area and help them get on to school.

It was very frustrating for the teachers because they would have school if there were enough kids even from town or close around to qualify by the rules that that was a school day. But there were some kids out on the ends of the routes and all that did not get to school for several weeks and I think there was a couple of families that were out in the boondocks, that it was almost 6 weeks before those kids got back into school.

Kyle: I've heard other people talking about they got into town and they couldn't get back home so local families put up the kids.

Loretta: We were so lucky that this blizzard started that day instead of the next morning. The next afternoon would've been [00:36:00] the first day of school after the

holiday and we would've had hundreds of school kids all over this country when that thing caught. It was a very, very lucky thing that it started on the weekend.

Kyle: To wrap it up here, I've heard people talk about that there were some bad winter storms in the 70s and the 80s but nothing quite like '49, would you agree?

Loretta: Yes. It was the storm of the century as they say. It was so severely cold and most of our other storms come later in the season. It'll be a wet sticky snow but this was so blistering cold that it suffocated you, it suffocated the livestock. You couldn't do anything in it. You couldn't see. You couldn't keep from slip sliding or running into snowbanks. It was just totally miserable for so many hours that there was no way to cope. We just had to just give up and stay in where it was warm until it quit.

Kyle: It was storm after storm until about February 20th. I don't know if that was true here or not but that's kind of what I read.

Loretta: Probably about the same over the whole area. Some of the snowbanks, especially in one grove of trees near Carpenter, it was July 7th I think, when it disappeared. It was well into the summer. There were still crystal snowbanks in that grove of trees.

Kyle: Wow.

Loretta: It ...[00:38:00]

Kyle: I've talked to people who've said if I never see another scoop shovel again, that'd be fine with me.

Loretta: And yet, we could sled. You could turn a shovel around with the handle in front of you and slide. We used the shovels to sled on if we had nothing else. We made it work, made due. I was 12. I was taking care of the rabbits and pigeons and the chickens and most of them survived. Anybody over 4 years old that went through that blizzard, can remember it.

Kyle: Kind of etched into their mind.

Loretta: Totally. And yet my mother was writing her diary and she was worrying about the people in Hawaii where there was a volcano. The radio was telling us of the floods back east and there were more people died back there in the floods than did here in the blizzard. It was not major news across the country. The Life magazine did do an article very briefly. Times magazine had a couple of paragraphs. But the rest of the world, it wasn't a major event at all. I don't think of anything else I guess because I know you're going to have to condense greatly.

Kyle:           Then I'm going to say this is a wrap.

Loretta:        I think we better wrap.

Kyle:           Okay.